

(By: Phillip Dine, The St. Louis Post Dispatch) WASHINGTON — After a year of escalating Afghan heroin production, calls are mounting for a shift in U.S. policy aimed at turning Afghanistan's poppy into an economic asset by using it to produce medicinal painkillers.

Backers of the proposal include several leading scientists and economists, as well as some in Congress. The Bush administration is skeptical.

Rep. Russ Carnahan, D-St. Louis, plans to use his recently acquired seat on the House International Relations Committee to bring up the matter when lawmakers convene next month.

"You can't just cut off the poppies because that's the livelihood of the people who live there," Carnahan said Thursday. "But providing them with alternative legal markets for pain-relief medication is a way to help cut back on that heroin supply."

Carnahan hopes to drive these points home by using testimony from law enforcement officers, drug abuse experts and scientists from St. Louis, where officials say an influx of Afghan heroin is causing problems.

"We need to have a better way of dealing with the problem, since it's proving to be so deadly here in St. Louis and in the Midwest," he said.

In backing the idea, Carnahan and others cite its success elsewhere.

Thirty years ago, U.S. officials fashioned a treaty that turned a looming narcotics threat in Turkey and India into a part of their legitimate economies using poppies to make legal medication. Those nations export raw opiates from which painkillers are produced by companies such as Mallinckrodt of St. Louis.

Australia has a thriving trade from altered, morphine-free poppies that cannot easily be used to produce heroin. The painkillers derived from a compound it produces, called thebaine, are potent and in demand throughout much of the world.

Administration skeptical

Congressional frustration has grown as Afghanistan's illicit poppy cultivation, which has exploded since the U.S. invasion, has jumped 60 percent during the past year. It now produces 90 percent of the world's heroin, while helping fund the Taliban insurgency.

But the administration sees problems with a proposal to produce legal poppies.

Tom Schweich, a senior State Department official who is spearheading U.S. efforts to curb Afghan narcotics, said he welcomed "creative ideas" but found this one to be unrealistic.

He said Afghan farmers wouldn't have enough economic incentive to turn away from illegal poppy cultivation. He added that Afghanistan lacks the required business infrastructure for processing, manufacturing and distribution, and that the oversight needed to prevent illicit drug trafficking would be near impossible.

"You really need to keep it illegal and eradicate it," Schweich said.

James O'Gara, deputy director for supply reduction at the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, added that Afghan poppy is so bountiful that it could be "out of whack" with what is needed for the medicinal market.

Beyond those concerns, there also would be agricultural challenges in implementing such a program, as well as likely opposition from nations now reaping profits from the legal poppy trade.

Afghan heroin in St. Louis

The Post-Dispatch reported in May that police and health officials in Missouri and Illinois were noting increased arrests, seizures of contraband and drug overdoses related to Afghan heroin. This week, law enforcement officials in Orange County, Calif., said a sharp rise in Afghan heroin is the top drug problem they face.

Carnahan's involvement stems in part from a meeting his staff recently had with Percy Menzies, who runs an addiction recovery center in St. Louis, and Dan Duncan, of the St. Louis chapter of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse.

"The amount of middle-class people using heroin in the St. Louis area the last couple of years just horrifies me," Duncan said. "It's long past time we take a good hard look at some new strategies."

Menzies, president of Assisted Recovery Centers in St. Louis, spent 18 years at Dupont Pharmaceuticals, where he worked with poppy-derived substances to treat heroin addiction and helped establish treatment centers in five states.

"For the first time, we have more people addicted to heroin than alcohol in my clinic, and these are suburban kids from St. Louis County. More and more Afghan heroin is coming in," Menzies said.

Opium replaces money

Vanda Faber-Brown is an expert in the role of narcotics in illicit economics and military conflicts. Faber-Brown, who works at Harvard University and the Brookings Institution, said convincing Afghan farmers to change their brand of poppy would be easier than trying to wipe out poppy fields altogether, destroying their livelihood.

"Essentially, opium has replaced money in key day-to-day activities in the countryside," Faber-Brown said. Poppy's domination of Afghanistan's economy — about 30 percent of economic activity — dwarfs anything previously seen in Colombia, Bolivia or Burma, she said.

Biochemist Toni Kutchan leads an internationally renowned research team on medicinal plants, including poppy, at the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center in St. Louis. She spent two decades in Germany, where she also headed research teams in plant biochemistry.

"The idea of creating a trade for morphine-free opium is very worthwhile and needs to be thought through carefully," she said. "It should not be pushed off the table by a knee-jerk reaction against it."

The Australian poppy plants are an easily achieved mutant, but there could be a legal issue of patents, Kutchan said. If that posed problems because the Australians did not want to share the plants, the same ones could be created by genetic modification, albeit with more difficulty, she said.

A related option is to bring Afghanistan into a 1970s treaty, reached with U.S. prompting, that allows Turkey and India to keep growing poppies as long as the opium produced is sold to companies that make legal painkillers. Experts say that while this wouldn't require changing the type of poppies in Afghanistan, the strict regulation needed could be a problem, given Afghanistan's ineffective government.

Call for change

The search for a new approach is largely prompted by the failure of current U.S. policies to stem Afghan poppy production.

James Dobbins, who was President George W. Bush's first special envoy to Afghanistan after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, said proposals for a morphine-free poppy should be closely

examined.

"I'd certainly like to see a study on how feasible that is," said Dobbins, who now directs the International Security and Defense Policy Center at the RAND Corp. "I do think that the current U.S. and international effort is at best a kind of a Band-Aid that can't have more than a marginal impact."

Dr. Charles Schuster headed the National Institute on Drug Abuse under Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush and is now director of the Neuroscience Institute at Loyola University in Chicago.

"I think the government should give serious consideration to attempting to implement that type of program," he said, adding that current U.S. policies alone "are never going to be the solution for this."

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